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A LENTEN EXERCISE:

22.

A CONTRIBUTION, IN SYMPATHY WITH THE SEASON,
BY A STRANGER OF ANOTHER CHURCH,
YET NOT ANOTHER.

PSALM LI.

"Have mercy on me, O Lord."

"Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion,
Build thou the walls of Jerusalem."

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A LENTEN EXERCISE.

Psalm li., 1—19.

I KNOW nothing for our use and help more full, broken, and precious in its penitence; so immediate, ample, and sweet in its encouragement; yet so holy and lasting in its healing—as this psalm. Laying hold, at once, of the full, fatherly, and forgiving feelings of God's heart, it opens, spreads out, reiterates, and presses its suit, as what His returning child does not more need for its peace, than what it is of its Father's heart to grant for His glory. It is, emphatically, the prayer of faith; the meeting and melting of heart with heart, ours with God's, in confession; the responding and uniting of will to will, the human to the divine, in asking; the strong encouragement found and taken, which the weakest and most weighed down disciple of us all may take from the reproach of Jesus—"Hitherto ye have asked nothing in My name; ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full." And oh! it is so blessed to be taught of God, as here, so in our own soul's experience, that the deepest searchings and gushings of penitence, just because they are moved by a sight of our sin in the light of a Father's love, do thus pass out and upward into the highest aspirations and largest askings, till the individual case and pressure are relieved and lost in panting anticipations of Zion's prosperity!

1. I would, by God's blessing, dwell firstly, for a moment, on the opening petition, the subject matter of the psalm.

2. I would then, secondly, offer a simple exposition of the verses, in their order—seeking to force out nothing which this

beautiful outburst of penitence does not contain; while desirous to altogether miss nothing which it does contain.

3. I would, lastly, seek, in the close, to apply what seem its chief lessons.

1. "Have mercy upon me, O God." Now this cannot mean, as addressing God, "Become a forgiving God;" as if this were not of His character and essence. Even the blood of atonement does not create any new thing in God's heart. It only brings out, to meet the altered condition and need of His creature, what was always there. Neither, any more, can this petition, as uttered by one who knows God, mean—"Pass on me the act or judgment of justification." That, as to the person, is done once for all. Still, the question may rise—"Does it mean," as the prayer of a believer under the conviction and sore pressure of some present personal guilt—"Lord, remit, pass by this sin;" or "Lord, give me the renewed sense of Thy forgiving love." I believe it includes *both*. Under the conviction that none can forgive sin but God, and, equally, that none can "bind up" but He who has broken, it asks of His grace, at His hand, both pardon and healing.

Let us now go together to the exposition.

VERSES 1, 2.

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness; according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sins.

Here is prayer as God would have prayer ever to be, in its essence, its plea, its importunity. Its strong purpose *to have an answer* at once strikes us. So it is prayer—it is not words. Nor, when so, is it done, when the words are done. So St. John teaches (I. John, v., 14). Thus our prayer runs, "Have mercy," a sinner's prayer, still put forth in the spirit of a child coming into its Father's presence, as knowing His name and heart. "Have mercy upon me, O God," thus individualizing itself, conviction striking home, for its own sin has "found it out." "Have mercy upon me, *according to Thy loving-kindness*," its root-plea, always just what is in the

heart of God. "Have mercy upon me, according to Thy loving-kindness: *according unto the multitude* of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions"—so enlarging its encouragement by the remembrance of so multiplied acts of tender mercy. And have we ever a deeper hold of a generous benefactor than when we remind him of his *own* past benefits, plead him thus with himself? Therefore, says the soul here—"O, my God, it is so like Thee, it so becomes Thee to forgive,"—"Blot out my transgressions." "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sins."

VERSE 3.

For I acknowledge my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me.

Two reasons are here brought before God why He should be moved to forgive. 1.—Acknowledgment of sin, so fully taught us in Psalm xxxii., as a consenting to God's righteousness in the infliction by which we are made to feel the bitterness of our wanderings. 2.—Our distress of soul, as a thing fitted to move God; just as even an offending child's suffering upward look appeals to, and prevails with, a parent's heart. This truth, the importance and necessity of confession in order to forgiveness, and this confession over a sacrifice, was taught, from the beginning, to our first parents, in those "coats of the skins" of slain animals, with which the Lord God Himself is said to have "clothed them" after their fall. And what else teacheth the great ordinance of the scape-goat, over whom confession was to be made "of all the iniquities of the children of Israel, *putting them* (it is said) on the "head of the goat?" O sinner, "how can two walk together, except they be agreed?" And how, or where else, canst thou find meeting-place and agreement with thy God, but over His sacrifice, in the blood of the Lamb?

Again: "my sin is *ever* before me." This is not added for forgiveness alone, nor will the feeling terminate with forgiveness obtained. It is akin, I feel, to the first deep utterance of renewed intercourse with a friend from whom our own misconduct had estranged us. It is such a relief to the pent-up heart, it is so natural to say, and over and over again to say, "I can never forget it, never forgive myself for having so hurt and grieved you."

VERSE 4.

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight; that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Most men can understand how man may offend his fellow-man, and that he may be righteously angry; and the anger of even an offended revengeful man, ever pursuing us, is sometimes a very awful thing. But it is with *God*, and the anger of God, we have all primarily to do, even in our social sins; for such was the sin which God made the occasion of drawing out from David this affecting psalm. He had done, his conscience was defiled and laden with, the foulest and deepest injury which man can perpetrate against his brother-man. And surely he did not make light of this sin against first injured and then murdered Uriah. Yet he says, "against *Thee*, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight." So, it is this perception which can alone make us enter into what follows—"That Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when Thou judgest." It is the knowledge of all sin, as striking first and most deeply against *God*, that creates the holy penitence which moves and empowers us to come, in all worship, to "the *just* God," and yet the Saviour. And how beautifully does this open to us the Father's righteous, as deep full joy, over the returning prodigal, bringing the burden of his sin and shame to the paternal door, to lay it *there*; because nowhere else, he knew, could it be borne and sympathized with.

VERSE 5.

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

He traces back the outbreak to its deep-seated fountain of pollution *within*; and this not to extenuate but to deepen his confession. Men often speak of the power of temptation, and the strength of their passions, as if excusing themselves and imputing blame to God. Nay, men would fain be quit of this truth—man's inward, total corruption, altogether; and this mainly because their pride rises at, and resists the thorough needed remedy. Hence the rooted folly of much of the education and legislation of our day, which takes no adequate

account of what man really *is*, and *needs*. And hence, also, human bosoms and society fret, and fester, and rage as they do—a heaving, sweltering, foul tide; for the tree and oil are not thrown in, which alone can calm, and purify, and sweeten the waters. O, what meaning has education, what power law, without the blood and spirit of Christ to cleanse, move, and enable?

VERSE 6.

Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts; and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

I must be satisfied with no mere shallow, passing apprehension of my evil state, but seek a thorough and deep-going scrutiny. No “whited sepulchres” can have place here—in the sanctuary, at the table of the Lord, in the blood of Jesus, the only true *confessional*: but what men call “making a clean breast”—what the Book means by “the true,” *i.e.* the inward “circumcision.” And God Himself will help to this—it is within the grace, the better promise of His covenant. So is it added—“and in the hidden part Thou shalt make me to know wisdom”—“wisdom!” *i.e.* clearly to know my evil heart, my secret sin, my duty to confess, my need of cleansing. The Psalmist, in another place (Psalm xc., 12), having first said—“Thou settest our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance”—prays, “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto *wisdom*.” Now, “*Christ*,” says Paul, “is of God made unto us *wisdom*.” Thus the petition comes out, “So teach us to number our days,” as that we be led to Jesus. Our days are few, because they are evil; and the Spirit’s first work, in “taking of the things of Christ, and showing them to the soul,” is to “convince of sin.” What a contrast to man’s way to, and estimate of, wisdom, this of God’s! Dear reader, hast thou learnt this part of wisdom—of the knowledge of “Christ crucified?” “The fear of the Lord”—fear to sin—“that is wisdom;” and to depart “from evil” (of which the first step is confession), “that is understanding.” That I do aright conceive of, and interpret “wisdom” here, is clear from the petition that immediately follows.

VERSE 7.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean ; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

"Purge," &c., i.e. just apply to my soul afresh "the blood of sprinkling." You know the history of the preparation of the "water of purification," and its application by the bunch of hyssop (Lev. xiv., 2—9, and Num. xix., 2—17, 18). And the Holy Spirit by St. Paul, has interpreted the type for us (Heb. ix., 13, 14). The same was the doctrine of the prophets, also—"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord ; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow ; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Yes, this is God's order—God's reason for the *joy* of a forgiven soul !

VERSE 8.

Make me to hear joy and gladness ; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

Can we doubt, that to ask this joy on our day of penitence, is the will of God for us, seeing it was His will for even such a backslider as was David ? Drooping soul, the gloomiest view of thy case is not always, nor necessarily the justest. Repentance is not altogether unbroken sadness. There is "a need be," that thou shouldest be enabled to hear the view of thy sin. Gleams of gladness will, at times, break in upon the most sorrowful soul, and it is not good to doubt that these are from God. Nay, if you are afraid of self-deception, learn to carry your very uncertainty as to this, and to "cast" it, too, as "your burden, on the Lord." May I venture to add, that there is something in our national temperament, and in the cast of our national theology—still more, in our ever multiplied and favourite narratives of what have been well called "*dark experiences*," that too much dispose us to depression and gloom—so often greatly marring the beauty, as weakening the vigour of our Christian life. Let us learn more to combine Paul's attributes of soul—"sorrowful, yet always rejoicing"—to "serve the Lord" also "with gladness, and to come before His presence with a song." It was in a season of humiliation, that that blessed word was first spoken—"The joy of the Lord is your strength." (Neh. viii., 10.)

VERSE 9.

Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

I believe that this is not still the same simple and direct prayer for forgiveness, varied merely by other words. I believe it points and brings out a very beautiful grace in the true penitent's soul, even when possessing not only forgiveness, but enjoying the sense of forgiveness. As its own distress from sin, we saw, was urged (verse 3) to move God's pity; so the fact of that sin, it feels, must, in return, have been a *pain* to its Father's heart; and, accordingly, the petition, if I mistake not, is equal to this—"I cannot endure the thought, O Father, that *Thou* shouldst have to abide the view of such iniquity. I would it were *hidden*, and blotted from before Thee for ever." There is a passage to me so illustrative of this in one of our late noblest poets (Wordsworth), in himself not more high-souled, than far-seeing into the depths of humanity. He thus pictures a man excited into extravagant and God-forgetting hopes by the dawn of the first French Revolution, when all had disappointed and failed him, the holy partner of his bosom, and the pledges of their wedded love, first neglected and forsaken, and then snatched from him by death; himself left then on the bleak shore of life, "miserably bare," and brooding over the memories of the past; while conscience wrought him, thus speaks—

" Feebly must they have felt
Who, in old time, attired with snakes and whips
The vengeful furies. *Beautiful* regards
Were turned on me—the face of her I loved;
The wife and mother pitifully fixing
Tender reproaches, insupportable !"

VERSE 10.

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

And the same feeling is still, I believe, at work in dictating this petition also. The thirst of the soul now is to have all right within; not alone, nor so much for its own personal comfort and quiet, but such as may bear and please the eye of Him who "desireth truth in the inward parts," and this an abiding cleansing. "Create in me a clean heart, O God;

and renew a right," i.e., a constant spirit—a fixed "spirit within me." Oh! let there be no more wandering from Thee. And for this—

VERSE 11.

Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.

To be so "cast" is my desert for the past. But, oh! keep me in the vision—in that presence of thine,—which alone includes, and is the fulness of all that can attract, fix, satiate, and sanctify my poor, unstable, soul. And thus God keeps us, intelligibly, morally—not as confining a man by a chain in a room, but by filling that room with all that can feast the eye, and the heart; not by a mere decree, but by "shewing us the things of Christ."

VERSE 12.

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy Holy Spirit.

The joy, if it have been true, is lost, when the purity, or holiness is lost. And the bitterness of heart is often so named and pointed of God, as to reveal and bring home the sin which weeded away the joy. So God awfully smote David, in smiting the child of his guilt. But it is not always so. We must leave God to His own way of checking and restoring the soul. It may not be by added rebukes, but by some great and overwhelming goodness, that God brings back our joy, and "upholds again by His *free* spirit"—literally "*royal* spirit"—i.e., giving us dominion over sin. Whenever, under the law, the day of atonement dawned, the trump of jubilee was sounded throughout the land. And a conscience sprinkled" anew, and made clean by the blood, is the only jubilee of a man's soul. Then and thus delivered, the holy penitent, like Isaiah of old (Is. vi., 6, 7, 8), "when the live coal from off the altar (the emblem of Christ's sacrifice applied) touched his lips"—hears the voice asking, "Whom shall I send?" and he is equally ready with the answer, "Here am I, and me." For

VERSE 13.

Then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee.

It is a beautiful and blessed thing to be burdened with each other's sorrows (II. Cor. i., 3). It is a yet deeper blessedness,

far lovelier in the sight of God, far more like His "holy child" Jesus, to be concerned for each other's sins—not only not, by our heady and unwatchful walking, to be "partakers of each other's sins;" but to know, as applicable to the case of brethren, that holy word and love of Jesus—"For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth." Thus it was the thought of his sin, not alone as having grieved God, and separated himself from God, but as having also been a possible "stumbling," and weakness to His people, that stung the soul of the pious king of Israel, and, therefore, he adds—

VERSE 14.

Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation; and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.

In this, not seeking to turn away from, any more than to cloke, all the possible aggravations of his iniquity, but feeling how sin palsies the tongue and closes the lips, he even repeats the cry—"open *Thou* my lips." What a thought for us, and of the burden we are called, as pastors, to bear. Not only should we, at a season like this, be found, like the priests of old, offering up the sacrifices of confession and supplication for our own sins and souls first, and then for the sins and souls of others, yea, of the whole congregation—but interceding after the pattern of that leader of God's people of old (*Exodus xxxii. 32*), aye, it may be, of even "a greater than he."

VERSES 16, 17, 18, 19.

For thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it; thou delightest not in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt-offering, and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.

And this is the consummation of all prayer—the end and conclusion of the whole matter, in God's dealings with a soul, when it yields itself to His chastenings for "*Zion's good*"—willing—nay, even thankful, to "fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in our flesh, for His body's sake, which is the church"—till "Jerusalem's walls all be built"—Christ's body all be "perfected"—"the King's daughter,"—"the Lamb's wife" be wholly "made ready," and become "all

glorious within." Thus we help best the cause of Christ—thus we build up best the house of God. "Then shall He be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness." For we shall offer in the spirit and fellowship of him who cried (Psalm lxxix. 29)—"I am poor and sorrowful; let Thy salvation, O God, set me up on high." "Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas, and everything that moveth therein. For God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah; that they may dwell there, and have it in possession. The seed, also, of His servants, shall inherit it, and they that love His name shall dwell therein!"—Lessons.

1. Mark always the necessity of *knowing God*. There can be no prayer—no fellowship with God, without this (I. John i., 6). Prayer is not the act of the natural mind to right itself, but of the spiritual mind or life, developing, and more freeing, and strengthening itself.

2. Mark the equal necessity of *Confession* (I. John i., 8, 9), unto the enjoyment of communion with God. Is thy soul even yet consenting to this prayer—in its crying sense of need—its cleaving faith in mercy—its childlike liberty to ask—its fixed purpose and waiting expectation to receive the blessing?

3. Do we understand and enter into *this* true way of "building up" Zion? Is *this* that to which especially men are summoning themselves, and their perishing fellow-sinners, now? If ours, as some vaunt, be truly a day of restoration, like Ezra's and Nehemiah's, Oh, let us see it be not only begun, but carried forward, *baptised in confession* and prayer! Oh, to covet more for ourselves, and each other, "the better way" only—seeking to prove God, as Daniel proved Him (ix. 20, 21). We would hail all such, and help all such, as the true builders up of Zion—saying to them all—and their labours all—"all thine are mine, and mine are thine"—so be only, that Christ is "glorified in them!" Amen.

"Father! Thou hast patience long
With the sick and weak;
Heal us, make us brave and strong;
Words of comfort speak.

Touch my soul,
And make me whole,
With thy healing precious balm,
Ward off all would bring me harm!"

—ALBINUS, 1652.

Clifton, 18th February 1861.